John Virgin

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John Virgin (1838-1900) was one of Fairbury's most prominent citizens in the late 1800s. Mr. Virgin was a native of Indiana and was born in Carroll County on August 10, 1838. He was the son of Thomas and Lucinda (Girard) Virgin, who were natives of Ohio. Thomas Virgin was reared to manhood in Ohio, then moved to Indiana and was there married. He was a farmer by occupation and became a citizen of Illinois. In Illinois, he continued the cultivation of the soil up to the time of his death, which occurred in 1870. John Virgin came with his parents to Illinois in 1854 and located near Pontiac, where he worked on a farm. In August of 1861, at the age of twenty-three, John Virgin enlisted in Company K of the 3rd Illinois Cavalry. Approximately ninety Fairbury area men served in Company K. He entered as a Private August 7, 1861, and was promoted Orderly Sergeant, in which capacity he acted for nearly three years. He participated in all the major battles of the West, and was taken prisoner November 25, 1863, at Vermillionville, La., and was held for thirty days when he was paroled. He remained on parole seven months, during part of which time he served as Quartermaster in the parole camp, and upon being exchanged remained in this capacity until the expiration of his term of service. John was discharged on September 4, 1864, at Springfield, Illinois. John Virgin served three years fighting for the Union Army in the Civil War.

After the war, John returned to Fairbury and was a tenant farmer in Avoca Township. He married Miss Serepta J. McDowell in the Spring of 1865. Serepta was born in Livingston County on April 5, 1842. She came from a pioneer family who settled in Avoca Township in 1832. The names of her parents were John and Elizabeth (Moore) McDowell, natives respectively of Ohio and Tennessee.

John Virgin and his wife had four daughters. Georgie Annie was born in 1866, Minnie Alice in 1868, Alta Zeo in 1870, and Daisy Dean in 1876.

In 1868, he moved to Fairbury and began breeding Percherons, a French draft horse. He was one of the first breeders of Percherons in the United States.

In 1872, John traveled to France and purchased Percherons for shipping to his horse business in Fairbury. He also found a French citizen who would later acquire horses in France and then sell them on consignment to him. John capitalized his horse business using the money he had saved when he was a tenant farmer.

The Fairbury Fair was first organized in 1876 by the Fairbury Union Agricultural Society. John Virgin was its first President and served in that capacity for many years. In 1878, he was appointed Postmaster of Fairbury.

Sadness struck the Virgin family in 1881. Two of John Virgin's daughters contracted diphtheria. One daughter recovered, but the oldest daughter, fifteen-year-old Georgia Annie, died in September. Diphtheria claimed many Fairbury children until a vaccine was developed in 1923.

1888 was a very prosperous time for John Virgin. He was fifty years old in 1888. Since beginning his horse business in 1868, he had shipped between 400 and 500 Percheron horses from France to his Fairbury area customers. His horse sales in 1888 were about $35,000 annually. This amount of money is equivalent to $988,000 in today's dollars.

John designed and built a unique stable for his horse business. It was called the Horse Palace and was located on Third Street, just north of where the Walton Centre is now located. The building was of brick and frame construction. It was forty by 200 feet and was built to accommodate fifty head of horses. There was an exercise facility for the horses where their power was used to grind feed for their food. This unique building is depicted in one of the historic murals located in Veterans Memorial Park on Locust Street.

He was one of the charter members of Fairbury Post No. 75, Grand Army of the Republic (G. A. R.), and occupied most of its posts of duty. In 1888, he was the Commander of the Post. He took great pleasure in attending State Encampments and meeting his old comrades. He and his wife were members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and they contributed liberally to the support and maintenance of that organization.

John Virgin was heavily involved with the Fairbury and the Illinois State Fair. The Governor of Illinois appointed him to help plan the agricultural exhibits at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair.

In March of 1897, John Virgin and his family moved from Fairbury to Chicago. He accepted the job of the Superintendent of the Garfield park stables for $100 per month salary. This salary would be equivalent to $3,500 per month in today's dollars.

Sadness again struck the Virgin family in 1897. Daughter Alta Virgin died at the age of twenty-seven in Chicago. She was buried in Graceland Cemetery.

In November of 1900, John Virgin, age 62, attended the national meeting of the National French Draft Horse Association. John was Vice-President of this organization and was presiding over the meeting at the Sherman Hotel. John started to feel ill, and he was rushed to a back room in the hotel. In a few minutes, he died. While he was absent from the meeting, the members elected him Vice-President for another term.

John Virgin's funeral was one of the largest ever held in Fairbury. His obituary in the Blade was one of the longest ever published by that newspaper. John Virgin was one of the most famous citizens of early Fairbury. He was a Civil War veteran, and he was nationally known for his importation of French draft horses.

John Virgin imported and sold Percheron horses to Fairbury area farmers.